

Rome/Kabul/Rome: Elective Affinities and An Embassy Project

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Rome / Kabul / Rome: Elective Affinities and an Embassy Project

Michela Rosso

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This essay is a re-elaboration and extension of the paper “Rome/Kabul/Rome: Elective Affinities and the Project of an Embassy” presented by Michela Rosso and Vilma Fasoli in the session “Looking Eastward. Building Identities. The architecture of the building diplomacy beyond the Mediterranean in the age of empire” of the conference “Crossing Boundaries. Rethinking European architecture beyond Europe,” chaired by Mercedes Volait and Johan Lagae, supported by EC funding through the COST Action IS0904 (2010–2014) and held in Palermo on 13–16 April 2014. I would like to express my gratitude to the architect Andrea Bruno for generously opening his archive and patiently reading and revising my text.

- 1 As both symbols of the State and places devoted to the representation of sovereignty, embassies are an aspect of the “conspicuous visibility” of Italians abroad that still deserves some critical attention.¹ In fact, a cursory overview of the recent historiography on this subject shows the episodic nature of the literature on Italian embassies compared to those of other Western countries.² Apart from the extensive visual survey provided by the eight volumes published between 1969 and 1989 by Mariapia Fanfani,³ we still lack a comprehensive historical account of the architecture of Italian diplomacy outside the peninsula. Instead, the architectural history of Italian embassies, consulates, *Case d'Italia*, and Italian Institutes of Culture is often addressed from lateral perspectives, either as the built environment of diplomacy, whose history is narrated by its very protagonists, or as a chapter in the history of the Italian architects, engineers, and builders active outside their homeland.⁴ The majority of the literature published on the subject includes in fact a number of photographic surveys accompanied by short texts, issued in a limited number of copies. The authors of these surveys are neither professional architectural historians, nor political historians, but diplomats, who gained their knowledge of the matter from

personal experience, while posted to the host country. This is the case of the brochures written by Antonio Zanardi Landi on Belgrade, Massimo Spinetti on Vienna, Ferdinando Salleo on Villa Berg in Moscow, Stefano Ronca on Buenos Aires, Pasquale Baldocci on Dar es Salaam, Gaetano Cortese on Brussels, Tadeusz Jaroszewski and Luca Daniele Biolato on the Szlenkier palace in Warsaw, Gianpaolo Cantini on Villa Hesperia in Algiers, Gaetano Cortese on Piero Sartogo's recent proposal for the Italian Embassy in Washington D.C., and Silvio Fagiolo on Berlin.⁵

- 2 Certain twentieth-century embassies, like the ones in Berlin (reopened in 1991 after restoration on the design by Vittorio De Feo),⁶ Canberra (by Enrico Taglietti, in 1967), and Brasilia (by Pier Luigi Nervi, 1973-1977),⁷ or the more recent buildings in Washington, D.C. by Piero Sartogo (1996-2000), have attracted the attention of the architectural historians thanks to the quality of their design or the notoriety of their designers. However, less attention has been devoted to the far more numerous cases of already existing buildings subsequently converted into embassies or consulates. In fact, these repurposed buildings account for the vast majority of the sites of Italian diplomacy abroad.
- 3 Unlike other Western states, in the post-war years the Italian government did not promote a systematic embassy building program comparable to the one carried on by the US government, for example. The US embassy building program peaked at the beginning of the Cold War.⁸ This is particularly true if we focus on countries outside Europe: here, already since the nineteenth century the Italian institutional sites are predominantly consulates and legations. Only in few exceptional cases were they embassies. Consulates were mainly housed in suites located in pre-existing buildings, often patrician dwellings that were leased or purchased by the Italian State. The sites of the present Italian embassies, by contrast, belong to the legacy of Savoy-monarchy foreign policy (1861-1946): the Italian embassy in Mexico City is one example. Some embassies date back even earlier, to the Venetian Republic. For example, since before 1550, the Palazzo Venezia had been the Venetian embassy in Istanbul; it later became the property of the Habsburgs. The Palazzo was returned to Italy after World War I, and ceased to be an embassy with the transfer of the capital to Ankara.⁹ While the documentation regarding the years prior to the Italian unification is sparse, since 1861 the Italian foreign policy is mainly focused on the European countries (Greece, the Balkans, France, and Austria), South America, and Japan. In Istanbul, before the Palazzo Venezia was restored, the Italian minister or ambassador resided in the building now used as Italian Institute of Culture in the Tepebaşı District of Beyoğlu. The ambassador's summer residence in Tarabya on the spectacular shores of the Bosphorus¹⁰ was also Italian state property. It was re-built in 1906 to the design of Raimondo d'Aronco, an architect whose prolific work in Turkey has already been the subject of a number of studies.
- 4 When dealing with diplomatic architecture of recent periods, a distinction should be made between the "embassy," the ambassador's residence, and the "chancery," the embassy office building and staff workplace. Although the residence is a separate structure from the chancery it is often integrated and designed in conjunction with it.¹¹ While embassies are usually in capital cities and handle all foreign-affairs business, including military, economic, and scientific matters, consulates, usually emanating from embassies, are opened in smaller urban centers and handle minor international paperwork, commercial and administrative rather than political.
- 5 Italian unification was a turning point in the way national governments shaped their foreign policy, in part by means of architectural projects abroad. However, it was

especially after World War I and later, during the fascist regime, that national propaganda was materialized spatially through the promotion of new embassy construction.¹² One of the most remarkable examples in this respect is the Italian embassy in Ankara (1938-1940) designed by the engineer Paolo Caccia Dominioni.¹³ These interwar years were also the period when the embassy in Cairo, by Florestano Di Fausto (1929) was constructed. Di Fausto designed many other Italian government buildings.¹⁴

- 6 This article explores the overlooked case of the Italian embassy in Kabul, whose beginnings and subsequent history are necessarily embedded in the contingent phases of the Italian and Afghan political histories. The project was influenced by the rise of Fascism after the Great War, combined with the ambitious modernization projects carried out by the Afghan monarchy from 1919 until its fall in 1973.
- 7 The embassy's remote origins can be traced back to the year 1919, when the diplomat Carlo Sforza, serving as plenipotentiary minister in Istanbul, signed an agreement with the Afghan king Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) pledging Italian financial support for the Third Afghan War. Amanullah had ascended to the throne of Afghanistan in February 1919, following his father's assassination. He launched a series of fierce military campaigns on Afghanistan's borders. On 6 May 1919, he led a surprise attack against the British army in nearby Peshawar, initiating the Third Anglo-Afghan War. By August of that year, Afghanistan was independent, paving the way to what has been described as a special relationship between Italy and Afghanistan. This relationship was later confirmed and reinforced on 30 June 1921, when the Italian government recognized Afghan independence. Italian king Vittorio Emanuele III awarded the prestigious *Collare dell'Annunziata* to Amanullah. In 1922, the Italian embassy was established in Kabul. Italy then provided substantial financial and technical support for Amanullah's reform projects. It contributed to the construction of an updated national air fleet by shipping two aircraft built by Caproni, and also continued to send teams of skilled experts, technicians, doctors, and engineers. These consultants were crucial in the achievement of massive public works, including the construction of schools, hospitals, bridges, roads, and dams. Amanullah Khan brought Kabul, and Afghanistan, into the twentieth century. The modernization efforts supervised by foreign technicians affected many sectors of public life.
- 8 As part of his dream of modernization, Amanullah also launched a monumental program to build a new capital, in the Čārdeh plain southwest of Kabul. To be named Dār al-Amān for Amanullah, the project was designed by German architects and the French architect and archeologist André Godard, with German engineers in charge of construction. Regulations recommended abandoning mud constructions, and encouraged European architecture with detached houses visible from the street.¹⁵
- 9 Meanwhile, Italy's presence in the still highly strategic area of Central Asia had become a constant in the years following the Great War. The region was still fluctuating, destabilized by the end of the Ottoman Empire, the persistence of controversial relations between the winners of the war, and the hegemony exercised by the two major world powers, Russia and the British Empire. In 1929, when Amanullah Khan was forced to abdicate after the civil war, he chose a home in the Prati district of Rome (at via Orazio 14-18, the present site of the Nigerian Embassy). Together with his numerous family and servants, he established it as his residence-in-exile.¹⁶
- 10 During the Fascist regime, the successful campaigns led by Italo Balbo and the military equipment displayed by the Italian army during the wars of Ethiopia and Spain continued

to fuel the political and military aspirations of the Afghan sovereigns. However, diplomatic relations between Rome and Kabul were rocky at times, despite the fact that Italy had been the first Western country to recognize Afghan independence.¹⁷ The reasons for this must be sought, on the one hand, in the new course Benito Mussolini gave to foreign policy at the very start of his rise to power in the Autumn of 1922,¹⁸ and, on the other hand, in Amanullah's acceleration of his country's modernization. The Anglophile orientation that had characterized fascist foreign policy in Africa and Asia Minor since Mussolini's debut as Minister of Foreign Affairs was in conflict with the radical reforms introduced by Amanullah. These reforms were in fact inspired by the cultural revolution led since 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in nearby Turkey, to which London was firmly opposed. In both Afghanistan and Turkey, characterized by majority-Muslim populations, the processes of modernization and nation building implied the westernization of customs and politics. Consequently, the political and intellectual elites in both countries placed a high priority on architecture and urbanism, which served as both visible symbols and effective instruments of their modernizing agendas.¹⁹ Moreover, since Amanullah's rise to the throne, Turkish-Afghan relations had been further strengthened by the signature of a mutual agreement in Moscow in 1921, and later by the "Afghan-Turkish Agreement of Perennial Friendship" signed in Ankara on 25 May 1928. Amanullah's visit to Turkey in 1930 did not come as a surprise, then, as it only reconfirmed the strategic role played by Afghanistan on the international diplomatic scene.²⁰

- 11 Following Amanullah's exile, in 1929, the Italian delegation in Kabul was closed, and Gino Cecchi, the outgoing Italian plenipotentiary, was not replaced. Although the new king, Nadir, had on several occasions asked Italy to reopen the embassy, Mussolini did not consent until 1931. He appointed the Minister Vincenzo Galanti, whose extensive experience in Asia, acquired while posted in Shanghai, was well known.²¹ The plans to renovate and add to the first Italian delegation, established in 1922, probably date back to this period, as we shall later see.
- 12 The four-decade reign of Mohammed Zahir Shah, from 1933 to 1973, was an era of political and social peace.²² During this period, the first master plan (1964) marked an important attempt to reorganize Kabul's spatial structure. In 1971, the first revision to this plan was approved, in order to do justice to unanticipated and rapid growth. Its provisions included increasing residential density through large-scale construction of housing units. However, this vision of urban life in Kabul was at odds with local preferences for secluded private spaces, allowing for a separation between the public arena and the private, personal sphere of the family. The housing program could be considered as one of the catalysts for the rising political tensions within the capital city. In 1975 alone, no less than 6 000 applications were filed with the municipality for individual property, an eloquent expression of the implied public criticism of the new plan.²³
- 13 Like his predecessor Amanullah, Mohammed Zahir Shah chose Rome for his residence-in-exile. He lived in the suburb of Olgiata after being ousted by a coup in 1973. In 2002, following the defeat of the Taliban, he returned to his homeland.²⁴

The First Italian Embassy in Kabul

- 14 Due to the incomplete and fragmentary documentation concerning the site of the earlier Italian embassy, it is not possible for us to provide an accurate description of the

architectural features of the pre-existing building. In addition, the names of the architect or engineer and builder in charge of the design and construction have been lost. Moreover, in the 1930s, a series of earthquakes struck nearby, along the Soviet border, partially damaging the building's traditional mud structure—a fragile but widespread construction system.

Figure 1a: Traditional Afghan building techniques: water, clay and straw, the materials used for the construction of walls.



Source: C. M. Pecorella, *Fardà. Due anni in Afghanistan sotto l'Emiro Amanullah*, Palermo, 1930, figure 172.

Figure 1b: Traditional Afghan building techniques: Afghan construction workers beating lime, brick dust, and vegetable fibers, to be employed as a substitute for concrete.



Source: C. M. Pecorella, *Fardà. Due anni in Afghanistan sotto l'Emiro Amanullah*, Palermo, 1930, figure 173.

- 15 Nevertheless, from a series of pictures dating back to the 1950s, it is possible to reconstruct the hypothetical image of a two-story, split-level building resting on a stone plinth and covered with a flat roof.²⁵ The complex composition of volumes suggests a series of different construction phases, additions and modifications to the original project. The search for an effect of formal variety, meant to overcome the rigidity of the L-shaped main wing and the absence of any form of ornamentation on the façades, seems to emerge as the feature characterizing the project. This is especially visible on some of the projecting volumes and in the studied rhythm of the window spacing, but above all, in the semi-circular colonnade supporting the terrace and facing the garden.

Figure 2: The site of the first Italian legation photographed in 1960.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 16 Andrea Bruno, born in Turin in 1931,²⁶ obtained his degree in architecture from the Turin Polytechnic in the summer of 1956. For him, the commission to design the Italian embassy buildings in Kabul was only one aspect of an intense and long-lasting career in Afghanistan. Since 1961, in view of the listing and preservation of the Afghan architectural heritage, Bruno had been the architect in charge of vast campaigns of archeological and architectural inventory and restoration, jointly commissioned by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Afghan Government, UNESCO, and ISMEO (Istituto per gli Studi sul Medio e l'Estremo Oriente),²⁷ the agency founded in 1933 and directed by the archeologist Giuseppe Tucci.²⁸ The project to design a new embassy came only at the beginning of the 1970s. In fact, a proposal to rehabilitate the existing building had been put forward by Bruno a decade earlier, when Folco Trabalza was the Italian plenipotentiary in Kabul. However, after the disastrous earthquake of 1965, the idea of restoration was definitively abandoned. Two technical surveys carried out by experts had made it clear that no rehabilitation effort could guarantee the building's structural stability. Thus, what remained of the old building was demolished and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a restricted architectural competition for the design of a new diplomatic quarters.²⁹

On Some Key Issues Regarding the Design of Embassy Buildings

- 17 The last thirty years have seen a boom in scholarship and published literature on the plurality of modern experiences. A wealth of new research has been produced on modern architecture and national identity in non-Western contexts. These studies have

demonstrated how modern architecture is historically situated, contextualized, and politicized. Starting from this premise, the architectural history of embassies and diplomatic buildings can be considered as a special chapter of this wider field of research. Indeed, embassies are symbolically charged architectural objects defined by domestic policy, foreign affairs, and a complex set of representational requirements. As the ideal synthesis of the represented nation and the host country, they are the tangible embodiment of their bilateral relations, the expression of the ways in which the represented nation relates to the world, and of how its people view themselves.

- 18 Jane M. Loeffler's studies on the US embassy building program during the years 1954-1960 have demonstrated that the design of an embassy raises the question of how the new building should account for the local culture of the host country. The architect must also convey the values of the hosted nation: he or she must find a way to design an emblematic structure that nevertheless blends in with the local culture and environment. Confronted by the dilemma of reconciling these two apparently conflicting demands, the architectural projects of embassies have frequently oscillated between insensitive transplants and condescending emulations of local idioms.
- 19 Another pair of conflicting requirements faced by architectures of diplomacy is the need to design a building which provides an open, welcoming environment in which diplomacy and dialogue can flourish, and yet addresses the security issues in unstable regions. These two options, taken to their extremes, yield the glass box versus the concrete fortress. The problem of providing a transparent, open structure which nevertheless meets the security requirements for day-to-day dangers in a war zone is typical of the problem of the embassy as a building type. The following paragraphs examine the ways in which Andrea Bruno's plan for the new embassy in Kabul addressed some of the issues raised above.

The New Embassy

- 20 The decision to build a new reinforced concrete structure required a Western contractor able to deal with the challenges posed by local construction methods and an unskilled labor force. The candidate also had to be familiar with construction practices in a geographical and climatic environment almost completely new to the application of modern building techniques.³⁰ Although at the date of this commission, the Frankfurt-based contractor Philipp Holzmann AG had not yet been involved in the management of large building sites on Afghan territory, it had been active in infrastructural works and office buildings for public institutions since 1911 in countries such as Turkey and Persia, friendly with Afghanistan. Between 1911 and 1918, Holzmann had been one of the most prominent companies engaged in the construction of the new Baghdad Railway (Bagdadbahn in German) connecting Berlin to Bagdad (via Istanbul). In 1924, it was involved in Suez Canal harbor construction; from 1929 to 1931, it was in charge of completing a number of railway stations and bridges in Iran; in 1934, it was building roads near Pillau (Russia); it returned to Iran in 1935-1936 for the construction of a railway terminal in Tehran, and again in 1938-1940 to pour the concrete structure for Tehran University.³¹ For Holzmann, the commission in Kabul not only represented an expansion of its possible markets on a wider international scale, but also offered a privileged position for training the local labor force in new building techniques imported

from Europe. The training service was frequently requested by countries outside Europe when signing economic agreements with the Western powers.

- 21 For the architect Andrea Bruno, the Kabul building site presented a double challenge: first of all the project offered the opportunity to introduce an updated architectural culture in a territory that was still characterized by the permanence of archaic building techniques and practices.³²

Figure 3: Afghan workers installing the reinforcing bars for the embassy's roof.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 22 Moreover, the design of the embassy also served as a laboratory for the definition of a new architectural language. Since the nineteenth century, late historicist repertoires had dominated the expressive vocabulary of the architects involved in the design of most European diplomatic buildings. Thus, in Kabul, Bruno intentionally refrained from displaying any precedent or allusion to idioms referring to the visual culture of the host country. The only emblems he acknowledged were those of national diplomacy. He treated the flagpoles as part of the whole architectural composition and used the circle designed on the surface of one of the concrete screens at the residence's entrance to accommodate the seal of the Italian Republic (**fig. 4**).

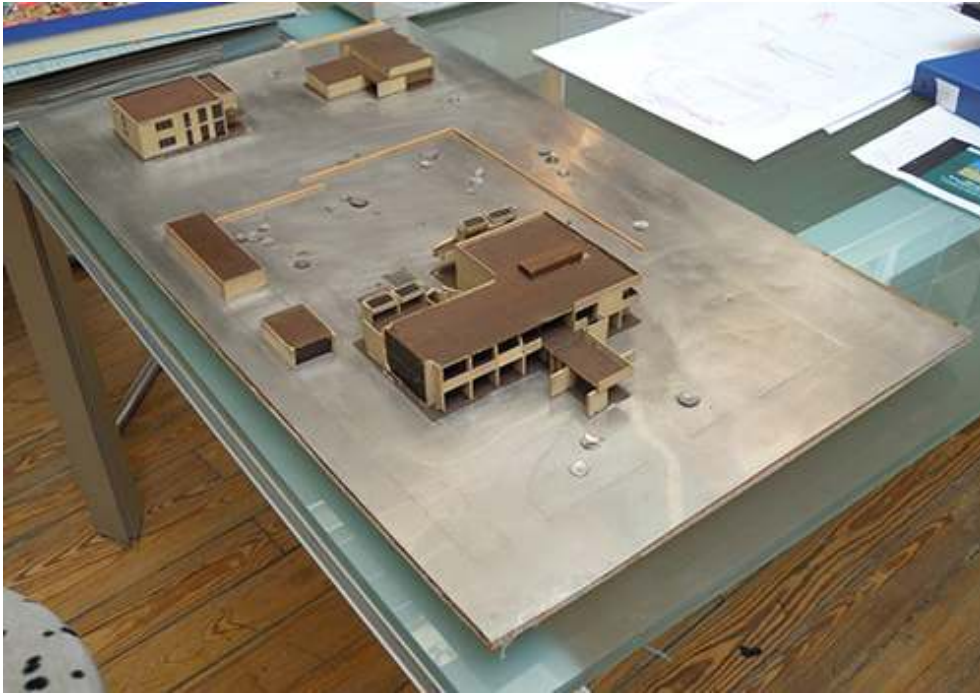
Figure 4: Overall view of the ambassador's residence.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 23 Instead, while addressing the demands typical of an embassy project, particularly in a context characterized by precarious security conditions, like the Afghan one, he drew upon the “qal’a,” a toponym commonly used in many Arab countries to signify “stronghold,” “fort,” “fortress,” or “citadel.” This was a reference to the traditional structures typical of the local built environment.³³
- 24 The headquarters of the Italian delegation in Kabul are located in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood, named after the Afghan prince and emir active in the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-1842.³⁴ This is a wealthy enclave of Kabul, built on a grid urban structure hosting other relevant national and international institutional buildings. For example, Afghanistan’s national government institutions, including the Presidential Palace, the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force, the German-Afghan Amani High School, and the reconstructed fifteen-building US embassy campus, designed by the American architectural firm Sorg Associates,³⁵ are all located in this district. The Italian embassy’s structures are built on a rectangular lot measuring 9,000 square meters (70.7 mx128.8 m), adjacent to a central artery of the city, the Great Massoud Road, connecting downtown Kabul to the Khwaja Rawash airport. In addition to a series of service structures, the entrance porter’s lodge, a security unit, and a parking garage, the new project encompassed the design of three main buildings: the residence, the chancery and the chapel.

Figure 5: Maquette of the Italian embassy quarter.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 25 All three buildings are structures built in reinforced and fair-faced concrete: their volumes are located on the periphery of the plot, leaving the central area for a newly designed garden. The choice of reinforced concrete was primarily dictated by the need to ensure seismic safety in an area characterized by a high earthquake hazard. The buildings of the Italian embassy in Kabul are outstanding in that they are the first Afghan buildings with a supporting structure in reinforced concrete constructed according to international seismic codes.³⁶

Figure 6: Views of the ambassador's residence.

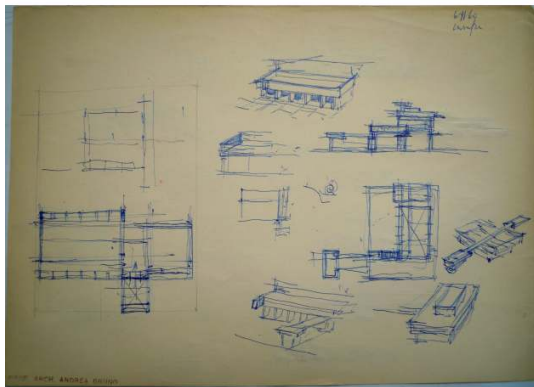
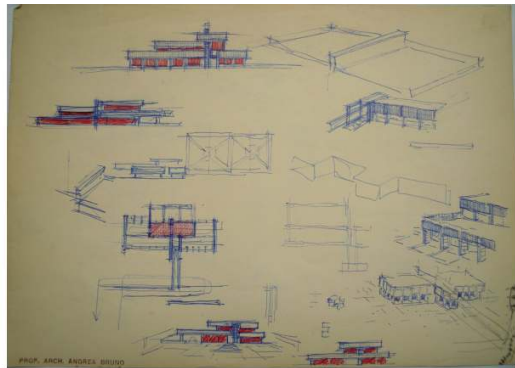


Source: *L'Industria delle costruzioni*, no. 64, vol. 11, 1977, p. 28.

The ambassador's residence

- 26 The compact, introverted volume of the office building is counterbalanced by the more dynamic and asymmetrical arrangement of the ambassador's residence. The idea was already clearly expressed in the first sketches for the project, where the volume of the residence resting on two floors is articulated through a sequence of projecting and recessing surfaces, giving way to loggias, canopies, and balconies.

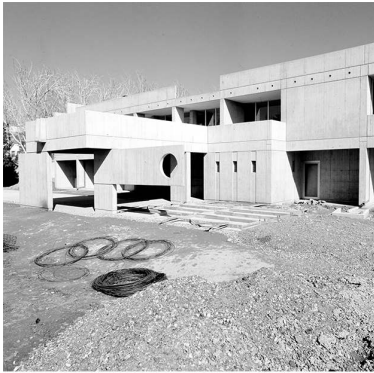
Figures 7a-7b: The ambassador's residence: preliminary studies.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 27 The entrance to the residence is on the western side of the building, protected by a roof overhanging the driveway. The residence is isolated from pedestrian and automobile traffic to the chancery and chapel by a series of screens.

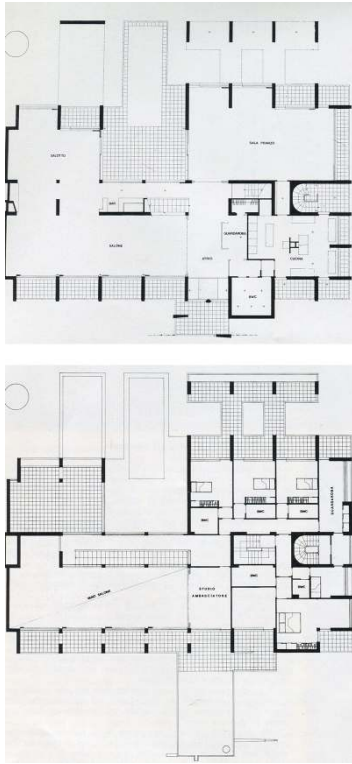
Figures 8a-8b: Views of the ambassador's residence showing the articulation of the fronts.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 28 In the interior, a sequence of eight parallel walls divide the space into seven regular bays. The dimensions of the rooms are dictated by the width of these bays, being multiples of them. After entering the building, the visitor is led through a vestibule and a cloakroom to a great rectangular double-height lobby lit by four large window screens facing west on to the main front. The lobby is connected to a more intimate sitting room facing east, and a bar. The bar gives access to a small corridor leading to the dining room and the kitchen. The vertical circulation is assured by three stairways.

Figures 9a-9b: Plans of the residence, ground and first floors.



Source: *L'Industria delle costruzioni*, no. 64, vol. 11, 1977, p. 26.

- 29 A single long ramp connects the ground-floor lobby to the ambassador's private study and the great terrace facing east on the upper floor. A smaller ramp leads from the kitchen to the bedrooms, and a third service stairway links the kitchen with the service area of the upper floor and the servants' quarters.

Figure 10a: The residence's interior: the lobby and stairs during construction.

SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.



Figure 10b: The residence's interior: view of the stairs leading to the ambassador's office.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 30 An intricate system of passages and small vestibules connects the service rooms of the ground floor.

The Concrete Surface Treatment: A Personal Interpretation of the Reinforced Concrete Aesthetics

- 31 Some recent essays in architectural historiography have shown how urbanism and architecture have both played a crucial part in the modernization strategies of recently decolonized non-Western countries. At the same time, the historians pointed out that these programs were not imposed as monumental, authoritarian plans. Instead, they were often the results of a negotiated consensus between local elites and an international class of design professionals. Studies on Chandigarh and Casablanca, for instance, have shown how the construction and physical transformation of these two urban realities implied a continuous dialogue between issues of modernization and the need to incorporate features of local history and tradition into the new urban and architectural schemes. In this respect, neither Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in India nor Michel Écochard in Morocco ever regarded the architect's terrain as a "tabula rasa."³⁷ The question of architectural expression becomes a fertile field for experimentation in projects where an imported culture (modern architecture and urbanism) confronts the specificity of the local history and culture.
- 32 The language of textured concrete was frequently explored and exploited by Bruno in a number of almost coeval commissions. Besides the embassy in Kabul, four other executed projects provide examples of this form of architectural expression: an office building and a City Council Hall (1973-1975), both in Rivoli near Turin; a gymnasium in Vignale Monferrato; an artist's residence and studio in the foothills around Turin (1976, with Biagio Garzena); and the Italian Institute for Archeology and Restoration in Baghdad. Although they vary, these examples all share an exquisitely crafted treatment of the concrete surface.³⁸

Figure 11a: Casa Gribaudo, artist's residence and studio, Turin. General view.

SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.



Figure 11b: Casa Gribaudo, artist's residence and studio, Turin. Detail of the logographs on the concrete surface.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

- 33 The undeniable fascination exercised on Bruno by such modernist works as Le Corbusier's *béton brut* post-war projects, though evident even in the embassy project, should be

considered within the broader context of his generation and their background. The Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier visited Turin in the spring of 1961,³⁹ when Bruno was an emerging professional. Perhaps the visit strengthened his admiration for the already aged master. However, Bruno makes no explicit direct references to Le Corbusier in all that he has written and said about his own practice. Moreover, the sophisticated treatment of the concrete surfaces in the ambassador's residence, as well as in Bruno's other contemporary works, is hardly reducible to the cliché of the *béton brut* formula. Although the exposed concrete shows the imprint of the formwork, it does not appear rough or unfinished. While only partly distancing himself from the idea of structural sincerity that informed the works of the early twentieth-century pioneers of exposed reinforced concrete construction (through a language that intentionally addresses the senses and promises to be immediately comprehensible to the viewer), Bruno seems to express the need to re-establish a communicative ground for architecture in the late twentieth century. The architect winks at the average observer through a syntax that is not only committed to direct, immediate understanding, but is also playful and entertaining. His concrete surfaces are enlivened by bright colors, bas reliefs (the so-called "logogriffs" designed by the sculptor Ezio Gribaudo), and autobiographical (and ironical) allusions to the craft of the architect. Thus, a restrained, subdued reflection of traditional Afghan building practices appears, almost unnoticeably, on the concrete surface of the entrance canopy soffit in the ambassador's residence: the special surface finish is provided by the delicate pattern of a woven straw mat. This element, a common feature of local earth constructions, was positioned at the bottom of the timber formworks before the concrete was poured, thereby leaving a faint mark on the ceiling's intrados.

Figure 12: Detail of the mark left by the woven straw mat on the concrete surface.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

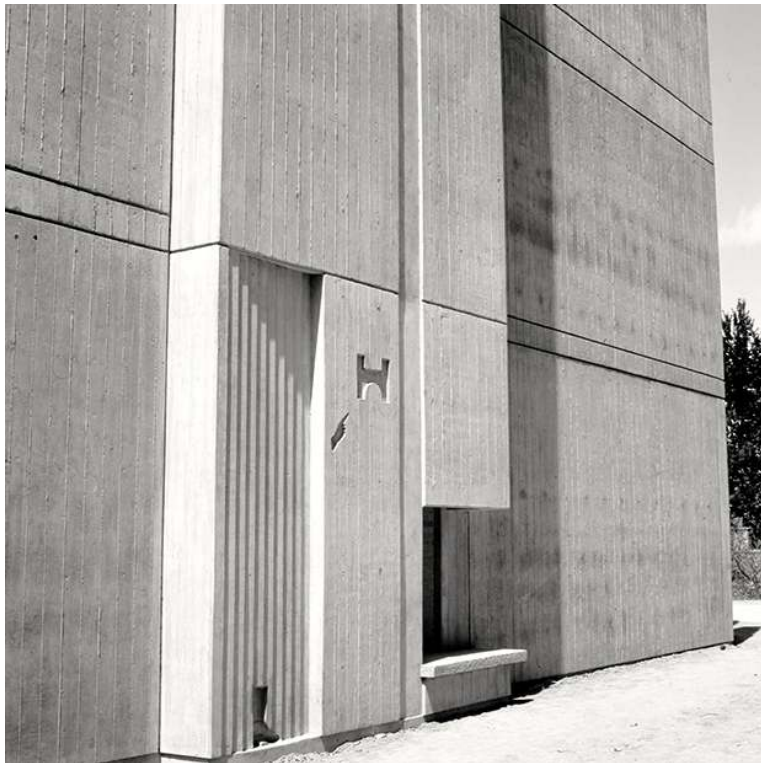
- 34 On the main elevation, just as on the soffit of the stairway in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rivoli, the architect left some of his trademarks: the shape of his hand, pointing to the first letter of the contractor Holzmann's name, and the imprint of the boots he wore while treading on Afghan lands.

Figures 13a: the shadow of the architect projected onto the concrete surface, an inspiration for the treatment of the wall.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

Figure 13b: the initial of the contractor and the architect's footprint on the concrete surface.



SOURCE: TURIN (ITALY), STUDIO ANDREA BRUNO.

The embassy after 1973

- 35 On 17 July 1973, while Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, was in exile in Rome, his cousin Mohammed Daoud Khan organized a *coup d'état* and proclaimed the Afghan Republic. The following year, the ribbon was cut on the new embassy building Bruno had designed.
- 36 In the years that followed, the life of the Italian embassy in Kabul was sharply impacted by the country's institutional instability, which had begun with the Soviet occupation (1979-1989) and led to the Taliban rise to power in the early 1990s. This turn of events weakened the relationship between Rome and Kabul considerably. During the Soviet occupation, the embassy building remained closed. It reopened, only to be evacuated for a second time in January 1993, soon after civil war broke out between the different mujaheddin factions. In 1999, there was a turning point in this state of affairs when the Italian government organized the first *Loya Jirga*, or "grand assembly," in Rome. The social and political forces opposing the Taliban met and the "Geneva Group" was set up to support non-radical Afghan factions. But it was only in December 2001, with the fall of the Taliban regime, that Bruno's embassy building on Great Massoud Road reopened. In 2002, Zahir Shah returned to Kabul to chair the *Loya Jirga*. He was proclaimed "Father of the Nation" in the new Constitution of 2004. Since then, Italy has been actively involved in the country's reconstruction. It has also provided support for the Afghan government by participating in NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and, since 2014, "Operation Resolute Support." During the fighting, the embassy buildings had suffered

considerable damage and deterioration, necessitating the organization of a massive restoration project. It got underway by 2004, with Andrea Bruno coordinating. The works were completed in the course of 2007, in time to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the first Italian embassy in Kabul in 1922.

NOTES

1. The term is borrowed from Carla DE TONA, "The Conspicuous Visibility of Italianness and the Invisibility of Italian Migrants in Ireland: A Sociological Analysis of a Regime Representation," *AltreItalia*, no. 30, 2005, themed issue *Passato e presente delle migrazioni italiane in alcuni Paesi europei*, p. 23-40.
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8. Jane C. LOEFFLER, "The Architecture of Diplomacy: Heyday of the United States Embassy-Building Program, 1954-1960," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1990, p. 251-278.

9. On Palazzo Venezia see Tommaso BERTELE, *Il Palazzo degli ambasciatori di Venezia a Costantinopoli e le sue antiche memorie. Ricerche storiche con documenti inediti e 185 illustrazioni*, Bologna: Apollo, 1931. The Italian presence in Istanbul dates back at least to the Middle Ages. For instance, by the mid-fourteenth century, the Genoese had established their residence, known as the Palazzo del Podestà, in the Galata district.

10. On the summer embassies of Istanbul, see Paolo GIRARDELLI, "Power or leisure? Remarks on the architecture of the European summer embassies on the Bosphorus shore," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 50, 2014, p. 29-58. On D'Aronco's work see Manfredi NICOLETTI, *Raimondo D'Aronco e l'architettura Liberty*, Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1982; Elettra QUARGNAL and Marco POZZETTO (eds.), *Raimondo D'Aronco architetto*, Milan: Electa, 1982; Diana BARILLARI and Ezio GODOLI, *Istanbul 1900: architetture e interni Art Nouveau*, Florence: Octavo, 1996; Diana BARILLARI and Marzia DI DONATO (eds.), "Osmanlı mimari": *D'Aronco: İstanbul projeleri 1893-1909; restorasyonlar, projeler, kitaplar* = *D'Aronco "architetto ottomano": progetti per Istanbul 1893-1909; restauri, progetti, libri* = *D'Aronco "Ottoman architect": projects for Istanbul 1893-1909; restorations, projects, books*, Exhibition Catalogue, Istanbul: Istanbul Arastirmalari Enstitüsü, 2006; Diana BARILLARI, "Novecento sul Bosforo. D'Aronco e Villa Italia Genius loci e Modernismo nel progetto di Raimondo D'Aronco per l'ex Residenza estiva dell'Ambasciata d'Italia a Tarabya sul Bosforo (1905-1906)," in Eleonora MANTESE (ed.), *Istanbul Theatrum Mundi. Unità di ricerca e didattica*, Rome: Aracne, 2014 (Quaderni della ricerca. Università iuav di Venezia, Dipartimento di culture di progetto), p. 47-56.

11. Outside the scope of this survey are the buildings constructed for the governors in the Italian colonial territories, Libya, Ethiopia, Italian Somalia and Eritrea, the Dodecanese, and Albania. On this topic see Mia FULLER, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism*, London: Taylor and Francis, 2007; Vittoria CAPRESI, *L'utopia costruita: i centri rurali di fondazione in Libia (1934-1940)* = *The Built Utopia: the Italian Rural Centres Founded in Colonial Libya (1934-1940)*, Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2009.

12. Stefano PRETELLI, "Il fascismo e l'immagine dell'Italia all'estero," *Contemporanea*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2008, p. 221-241.

13. See in this issue of *ABE Journal*, Cristina PALLINI and Armando SCARAMUZZI "Paolo Caccia Dominioni's work for the Italian Embassy in Ankara," URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/abe/3967>. Accessed 12 January 2018.

14. Among Di Fausto's works are the Italian legations in Belgrade (1924-1926) and Cairo (1928-1930), the Palazzo del Governo (1926), the post office building (1927), the Catholic cathedral Saint John (1924-1925), the Grande Albergo delle Rose (1927) all of which are in Rhodes; the Casa degli

italiani in Algiers (1931), the early drawings for the Italian embassy in Ankara, the Italian Consulate in Tunis (1931-1932) and the rehabilitation projects of pre-existing buildings in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Den Haag, Sofia, Istanbul, Oslo, Thessaloniki, Nice, Lisbon, Madrid, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, London. Besides this group of works see also the Italian schools in Al Mansúr (Egypt), Athens, and Casablanca (1930-1932). On Di Fausto's work see Fabrizio Di Marco, "Florestano Di Fausto, architetto del Mediterraneo. Profilo biografico," in Claudio VARAGNOLI, Angela APPIGNANI and Licio DI BIASE, (eds.), *Pescara senza rughe. Demolizioni e tutela nella città del Novecento* [giornata di studio, Aula Magna della Facoltà di Architettura dell'Università "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti e Pescara, 21 ottobre 2010], Rome: Gangemi, 2011, p. 119-129.

15. URL: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kabul-iii-history>. Accessed August 2017.

16. Luciano MONZALI, *Un re afgano in esilio a Roma. Amanullah e l'Afghanistan nella politica estera italiana 1919-1943*, Florence: Le Lettere, 2012.

17. Andrea VENTO, *In silenzio gioite e soffrite. Storia dei servizi segreti italiani dal Risorgimento alla Guerra fredda*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2010, p. 241-243

18. Fabio GRASSI ORSINI, "La diplomazia italiana dagli 'anni del consenso' al crollo del regime," *Annali dell'Istituto Veneto per la Storia della Resistenza*, vols. 13-16, 1992-1995, p. 125-148.

19. On the Turkish nation-building process following the proclamation of the Turkish Republic see Sibel BOZDOĞAN, *Modernism and Nation Building. Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*, Seattle, WA; London: University of Washington Press, 2001.

20. In this regard, the telegram dated 1 March 1930, from the Italian official in Ankara, Ottaviano Armando Koch, to the Italian Foreign Ministry, is significant: "Neither Moscow nor Ankara has any intention of giving up their influence in Afghanistan. Each country exerts it in its own way and with its own resources. Russia is interested in securing a forward post in Afghanistan for the purposes of its battle against the English for India. As for Turkey, it wants to regain its moral authority among the nations of the Middle East, thereby reaffirming the prestige of Kemalism in the Muslim world. In this context, Amanullah could still be the instrument of this twofold policy. His successor Nadir Khan is moving slowly on reform, paying so much respect to local traditions that he seems to be nipping Afghan nationalism in the bud. It has stopped the turmoil that was liable to spread to India. As a result, Nadir Khan is considered an ally by the British."; Rome (Italy), Ministero Affari Esteri, Archivio Storico Diplomatico, AP 1919-1930, AFG, b. 680, Ottaviano Koch to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, March 1st, 1930.

21. The Italian delegation in Kabul re-opened on 21 March 1931. Two reference works on Italo-Afghan diplomatic relations are: Luciano MONZALI, *Un re afgano in esilio a Roma. Amanullah e l'Afghanistan nella politica estera italiana 1919-1943*, Florence: Le Lettere, 2012; Mirella GALLETTI, "La politica italiana verso Assiri e Curdi (1920-1943) in Oriente Moderno," *Quaderni di Oriente Moderno*, no 3, 2001, in particular "Le relazioni tra Italia e Kurdistan," p. 149-182.

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Egidio CASPANI and Ernesto CAGNACCI, *Afghanistan, crocevia dell'Asia*, Milan: Vallardi, 1951; Egidio Caspani, "Kabul capitale dell'Afghanistan," *Le Vie del Mondo*, no. 6, 1951, p. 609-624.

23. URL: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kabul-iv-urban-politics-since-zaher-shah>. Accessed August 2017.

24. URL: <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?213340>. Accessed March 2014.

25. These pictures, which are part of Andrea Bruno's professional archive in Turin, have to be compared with the ones published in Camillo Maria PECORELLA, *Fardà. Due anni in Afghanistan sotto l'Emiro Amanullah*, Palermo: Edizioni Sandron, 1930, p. 68-69; and in Egidio CASPANI and Ernesto CAGNACCI, *Afghanistan, crocevia dell'Asia*, Milan: Vallardi, 1951, figures 94 and 193.

26. On the work of Bruno see: Mario MASTROPIETRO (ed.), *Oltre il restauro. Architettura tra conservazione e riuso. Progetti e realizzazioni di Andrea Bruno (1960-1995)*, Milan: Lybra, 1996; Jean-

Michel WILMOTTE (ed.), *Fare disfare rifare architettura: da Rivoli a Bagrati*, Paris: Fondation d'entreprise Wilmotte, 2014. On Bruno's Afghan mission see in particular his recollections, Andrea BRUNO, "Memories of Safeguarding Herat and Jam," in Jun-hi HAN (ed.), *Safeguarding the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan. Jam and Herat*, Paris: Unesco, 2015, p. 39-47. URL: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002330/233042e.pdf>. Accessed 20 November 2017.

27. The idea of creating an institute to handle Italy's cultural - and also economic - relations with India and Eastern Asia evolved in the late 1920s and early 1930s. See Gherardo GNOLI, "Giovanni Gentile Founder and President of IsMEO," *East and West*, vol. 44, nos. 2-4, December 1994, p. 223-229.

28. Bruno's vast fieldwork in Afghanistan includes the Mausoleum of Abdur-Razaq at Ghazni (1961-1965), later converted into the Museum of Islamic Art, the Minaret of Jam (1963 and 1974-1978); the citadel of Herat erected by Alexander the Great and its six minarets (1974-1980); the spectacular Valley of Bamiyan and the wall of the Buddhas (1960-1964), the conservation plan for which, approved by Afghan authorities; was presented in 1964, the year of the Venice Charter, at the 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments. See Mario MASTROPIETRO (ed.), *Oltre il restauro, op. cit.* (note 26), p. 12-39. The broader, pioneering census of Afghan monuments promoted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IsMEO, in cooperation with unesco, is documented by Giorgio GULLINI (ed.), *Attività archeologica italiana in Asia: mostra dei risultati delle Missioni in Pakistan e in Afghanistan, 1956-1959*, exhibition catalogue (Turin, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, April 1960; Rome, Palazzo Brancaccio, May-June 1960), Turin: Tipografia F.lli Pozzo-Salvati-Gros Monti, 1960.

29. Although no relevant documentation regarding the commission for the new embassy is to be found in the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAE), Bruno recalled how the work resulted from a restricted competition launched by the Ministry in the beginning of the 1970s (from the author's conversations with Andrea Bruno, Turin, via Asti 17, in February 2014 and May 2017).

30. Stefano BAJETTI, "Ambasciate d'Italia. Afghanistan: residenza e cancelleria a Kabul," *L'Industria delle costruzioni*, vol. 11, no. 64, 1977, p. 23-38.

31. Cf. the company's historic archive online at <http://holzmann.fh-potsdam.de>. Accessed on 20 November 2017. Holzmann filed for bankruptcy in 2003, but its shares began trading on the stock exchange again in 2013. After World War II, in this part of the world, Holzmann built a jute mill in Konar, India (1953); bridges in Mossul and Amara, Iraq (1952-53 and 1956), a reinforced-concrete bank building in Baghdad (1959-1960). In the 1960s, Holzmann received several commissions from the Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi.

32. From the author's interview with Andrea Bruno, Turin, via Asti 17: February 2014.

33. The topic has been explored by Bruno in Andrea BRUNO, "Caseforti in Afghanistan," *Castellum*, no. 12, 1970, p. 69-90.

34. URL: <http://razistan.tumblr.com/post/22030991718/in-the-wazir-akbar-khan-enclave-impoverished>. Accessed March 2014.

35. Now DLR Group. URL: <http://www.dlrgroup.com/work/us-embassy-afghanistan/>. Accessed 12 January 2018.

36. Stefano BAJETTI, "Ambasciate d'Italia. Afghanistan: residenza e cancelleria a Kabul," *op. cit.* (note 30), p. 38.

37. See in particular Tom AVERMAETE and Maristella CASCIATO, *Chandigarh and Casablanca. A report on modernization*, publication to accompany the exhibition "How architects, experts, politicians, international agencies, and citizens negotiate modern planning: Casablanca Chandigarh" (Montreal, CCA, 26 November 2013-20 April 2014), Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture; Zurich: Park Books, 2014.

38. Tobia SETTE FANTI, "Aula consiliare del Municipio di Rivoli," *L'Industria delle costruzioni*, vol. 10, no. 62, 1976, p. 3–10; Giovanni RAINERI, "Una casamatta ai piedi della collina torinese," *L'Industria delle costruzioni*, vol. 11, nos. 69–70, 1977, p. 43–50; Alfredo PASSERI, "Due interventi di edilizia per uffici," *L'Industria delle costruzioni*, vol. 12, no. 75, 1978, p. 39–46; Gianfranco GRITELLA, "Calcestruzzo colorato e decorativo," *L'Industria italiana del cemento*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1984, p. 34–43.
39. See the testimony of the architect Leonardo Mosso in Leonardo MOSSO, "Maggio 1961: a Torino con Le Corbusier," in Marida TALAMONA (ed.), *L'Italia di Le Corbusier*, Milan: Electa, 2012, p. 330–333, 428.

ABSTRACTS

As both symbols of the State and places devoted to the representation of sovereignty, embassies represent an aspect of the "conspicuous visibility" of Italians abroad that still deserves some critical attention. Although the Italian unification marked a new departure in the way the national government shaped foreign policy in part by means of architectural projects outside Italy, it was especially during the Fascist regime that national propaganda was spatially materialized through the promotion of new embassy buildings, one prominent example being the one in Ankara. This paper proposes to explore the overlooked case of the Italian embassy in Kabul. The project's inception and subsequent history are necessarily intertwined with the historic phases of Italian politics, from the end of the Great War, through the rise of Fascism until the post-World War II years, marked by a new aspiration towards a moral and physical reconstruction of the country. The embassy's origins can be traced back to 1919, when Carlo Sforza, the Italian plenipotentiary minister in Istanbul, signed an agreement with the Afghan king Amanullah Khan pledging Italian financial support for the Third Afghan War. Architect Andrea Bruno was commissioned to design the present embassy building, which opened in 1974. Since the early 1960s, Bruno had been involved in the restoration works on the Buddhas of Bamiyan, later inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger.

À la fois symboles de l'État et lieux dédiés à la représentation de la souveraineté nationale, les ambassades sont un des aspects de la « visibilité ostentatoire » des Italiens à l'étranger qui impose un regard critique. Bien que l'Unification italienne ait marqué un nouveau départ dans la façon dont le gouvernement a élaboré sa politique étrangère, partiellement au moyen de réalisations architecturales hors du pays, c'est surtout sous le fascisme que la propagande nationale a été spatialement matérialisée par la construction de nouveaux édifices diplomatiques, l'ambassade d'Ankara en étant un exemple majeur. Cet article propose l'étude d'un édifice méconnu, l'ambassade d'Italie à Kaboul (Afghanistan). La conception et l'histoire du projet sont inévitablement liées aux grandes phases de la politique italienne, de la fin de la Grande Guerre, en passant par la montée du fascisme, jusqu'à l'après Seconde Guerre mondiale, et marquées d'une aspiration nouvelle à une reconstruction morale et physique du pays. Les origines de l'ambassade remontent à 1919, quand Carlo Sforza, alors ministre plénipotentiaire à Istanbul, signe un accord avec le roi Amanullah engageant une aide financière italienne à la Troisième Guerre anglo-afghane. L'architecte Andrea Bruno reçut commande du projet de l'actuelle ambassade inaugurée en 1974. À partir des années 1960, Andrea Bruno avait été impliqué dans la restauration des bouddhas de Bâmiyân qui allaient, en 2003, être inscrits sur la liste du patrimoine mondial en péril de l'UNESCO.

A la vez símbolos de Estado y representación de la soberanía nacional, las embajadas son uno de los aspectos de la “visibilidad ostentosa” de los italianos en el extranjero que reclaman una mirada crítica. Aunque la Unificación italiana supuso un nuevo punto de partida en la forma en la que el gobierno elaboraba su política extranjera, en parte a través de realizaciones arquitectónicas fuera del país, será sobre todo bajo el fascismo cuando la propaganda nacional ha sido espacialmente materializada por la construcción de nuevos edificios diplomáticos, siendo la embajada de Ankara un ejemplo notorio. Este artículo propone el estudio de un edificio desconocido, la embajada de Italia en Kabul (Afganistán). La concepción y la historia del proyecto están inevitablemente ligadas a las grandes fases de la política italiana, desde finales de la Gran Guerra, pasando por el ascenso del fascismo, hasta después de la Segunda Guerra mundial, y marcados por una nueva aspiración de reconstrucción moral y física del país. Los orígenes de la embajada remontan a 1919, cuando Carlo Sforza, entonces ministro plenipotenciario en Estambul, firma un acuerdo con el rey Amanullah comprometiendo ayuda financiera italiana a la Tercera Guerra anglo-afgana. El arquitecto Andrea Bruno recibió el encargo del proyecto de la actual embajada inaugurada en 1974. A partir de los años 1960, Andrea Bruno estuvo implicado en la restauración de los budas de Bâmiyân que serían, en 2003, inscritos en la lista del patrimonio mundial en peligro de la UNESCO.

Da sie zugleich Symbole des Staates als auch Orte sind, die Souveränität repräsentieren sollen, stellen Botschaften einen Aspekt der „verdächtigen Sichtbarkeit“ von Italienern im Ausland dar, dem weiterhin kritische Aufmerksamkeit gebührt. Obwohl die Vereinigung Italiens einen Neuanfang für die Art und Weise steht, in der die Staatsregierung ihre Außenpolitik unter anderem durch Baumaßnahmen im Ausland prägte, nahm insbesondere unter dem faschistischen Regime die Nationalpropaganda durch die Förderung neuer Botschaftsbauten auch räumlich Gestalt an. Ein berühmtes Beispiel hierfür ist die Botschaft in Ankara. Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht den bisher vernachlässigten Fall der italienischen Botschaft in Kabul. Der Planungsbeginn und die spätere Geschichte des Gebäudes sind zwangsläufig eng mit den historischen Phasen der italienischen Politik vom Ende des ersten Weltkriegs, dem anschließenden Aufstieg des Faschismus bis in die Zeit nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg verflochten, die von einem neuen Willen für einen moralischen und physischen Wiederaufbau des Landes bestimmt wurde. Die Planungen für die Botschaft lassen sich bis 1919 zurückverfolgen, als Carlo Sforza, der Bevollmächtigter Minister in Istanbul, ein Abkommen mit dem afghanischen König Amanallah Khan unterzeichnete, in dem er die finanzielle Unterstützung Italiens für den dritten afghanischen Krieg zusicherte. Den Auftrag für den Entwurf der heutigen, 1974 eröffneten Botschaft erhielt der Architekt Andrea Bruno, der seit Anfang der 1960er Jahre an der Restaurierung der später ins Weltkulturerbe aufgenommenen Buddhas von Bamiyan beteiligt gewesen war.

Le ambasciate, simbolo dello Stato e, al contempo, luoghi dedicati alla rappresentazione del potere, costituiscono un aspetto della “visibilità manifesta” degli italiani all'estero che merita ancora la nostra attenzione critica. Anche se l'unificazione italiana segnò una svolta nel modo in cui il governo nazionale plasmò in parte la politica estera attraverso progetti architettonici al di fuori dell'Italia, fu soprattutto durante il regime fascista che la propaganda nazionale si materializzò spazialmente attraverso la promozione di nuove ambasciate e quella di Ankara ne è un esempio di spicco. Questo documento propone di esplorare il caso trascurato dell'ambasciata italiana a Kabul. L'inizio del progetto ed il suo prosieguo sono necessariamente intrecciati con le fasi storiche della politica italiana tra la fine della Grande Guerra, l'ascesa del Fascismo e fino agli anni del secondo dopoguerra, segnati da una nuova aspirazione verso una ricostruzione morale e fisica del nazione. Le origini dell'ambasciata risalgono al 1919, quando Carlo Sforza, il ministro plenipotenziario italiano a Istanbul, firmò un accordo con il re afgano Amanullah Khan, che

assicurava il sostegno finanziario italiano alla Terza guerra afgana. L'architetto Andrea Bruno era stato incaricato di progettare l'attuale edificio dell'ambasciata, aperto nel 1974. Fin dall'inizio degli anni '60, Bruno aveva partecipato ai lavori di restauro dei Buddha di Bamiyan che nel 2003 sarebbero stati iscritti nella lista del patrimonio dell'umanità in pericolo dell'UNESCO.

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